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Revolting New York: How 400 Years of Riot, Rebellion, Uprising, and Revolution Shaped a City.

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Revolting New York: How 400 Years of Riot, Rebellion, Uprising, and Revolution Shaped a City, Neil Smith, Don Mitchell (Eds). University of Georgia Press, Athens (2018). 368 pages, US\$29.95 paperback.

Revolting New York is an intoxicating, sometimes overwhelming, collection. It tells the story of New York City from its formation in the mid-seventeenth century until late 2017 focussing solely on its moments of revolt. As Don Mitchell puts it in his introduction, ‘the lightning strike of revolt illuminates the social structure at a particular, precise moment, but, like time-lapse photography, the succession of lightning strikes shows how some structural forces persist, while others rise and just as quickly disappear’ (p. 16). From indigenous struggles against Dutch colonisers to the media savvy protests of #BlackLivesMatter, the chapters hold together with a cinematic flow, interspersed with shorter vignettes that keep the timeline rolling. The pace is relentless. This lends the book an urgency that becomes clearer as the past slips into the present: protest movements are embodied power. They change the city, for better or for worse, whether intentionally or not. They may fail—sometimes brutally—but they fail with forward momentum, and those that appear to “hold” power are forever reacting to those who challenge it in creative, destructive, collective, and often startlingly brave ways.

The chapters coalesce around a series of disquieting rhythms—police repression, racist divisions, inequality, and the hope of a better world—that can become quite hypnotic. The sense that something (however disparate) unites these struggles is explicit, with the reader encouraged to look backwards and forwards simultaneously. At times, this is downright depressing (police impunity in the face of racist murder repeats as if on a video-loop), but it is also empowering, for two specific reasons. First, it functions like an open repository of moments (in the Situationist sense) in which the norms and power structures that govern the everyday spaces of the city are overturned. A sense of what is possible is briefly liberated, before being shut down with sometimes eye-watering violence. The book does an excellent job of placing each of these moments into New York as it exists now, whether through maps or the transposition of addresses that no longer exist. Through doing so, contemporary spaces that may seem “in reality” utterly banal, secure, lifeless, corporate, and so on, are suddenly lit up. This is a radical history that seeks to puncture our perceptions of the city.

At the same time, the rhythm of repetition cultivates a “tradition” of revolt that encourages the reader to see their potential role in changing the city. Knowing that so many generations of New Yorkers have struggled along such similar lines is akin to having history marching right behind you. In this sense, it works to change perceptions of ourselves as well as the city. This functions as a form of myth-making, and I do not say that to detract from its scholarly integrity, but to highlight its use-value (from the cover design to the light-touch on theory, this is clearly intended as a much-more-than academic text). In a word, it is inspiring.

This only works because the intellectual spine of the book—that revolt has dramatically shaped the city—is solid. The impacts of each “moment” can range hugely. As Brendan O'Malley shows in his wonderful chapter on the Aster Place Riot of 1849, the construction of a theatre without cheap seats, combined with simmering anti-British sentiment, brought thousands out onto the streets. In this tussle over theatrical sovereignty, patriotic notions of a republican community slipped away, with stark divisions along class lines increasingly visible. And so the ‘geographical and psychic divisions’ (p. 82) between the rich and the poor grew ever greater. In the Draft Riots of 1863—‘America's Deadliest Riot’ by Rachel Goffe and Esteban Kelly—warring factions of the then-volunteer fire brigades were involved in starting fires as well as putting them out. One effect of this was the setting up of a unified, professional fire brigade for the first time. Some accounts are joyous (transgender protestors taunting riot police in full drag after their raid on the Stonewall Inn), others are distressing (antisemitic flyers fed to black picket lines during the 1968 teachers' strike in a calculated attempt to divide and rule). Revolutions may be the locomotives of history, but they are never rolling down a straight track.

This “grand” narrative is enthralling because its constituent parts keep a tight focus on specific neighbourhoods in specific periods, and include rich insights into the lives of those pushed into outrage. Revolting New York eschews theoretical debate, but its content is rich with provocation. The content is ripe for a generation of activists who see the struggles against sexism, racism, inequality, exploitation, and so on, as intimately intersecting—both theoretically, in terms of how these forms of oppression become “real”, and strategically, in terms of how we might overcome them. The chapters pay little attention to charismatic individuals (the “Robert Moses” vs. “Jane Jacobs” narrative is refreshingly absent) but stay on the streets, focussed determinately on the mass of people, whose emotions, fears, and aspirations, are shown to hold immense potential power. Also conspicuous by its absence is any detailed engagement with a theory of capital: as an addendum to decades of radical geography, Revolting New York refreshes the stakes, reminding us (with a rollicking seriousness) that all the vaunted powers of the state and capital can be shaken when enough people enter the fray with enough determination. The book does not try to assert these observations outside New York (whether in “the City” of general theory, or other specific cities), leaving open an invitation to dismiss its findings as particular, or search for histories of revolt closer to home.

The closing words of Mitchell's Acknowledgements seem to channel the same dialectic of sadness and hope that is contained in so many of these stories. Neil Smith did not live to see this published, but it stands as a ‘monument to his will’ (p. 308). His chapters on Tompkins Square Park are written with a relish that was almost painful to read, and the entire sway of the book enriches our sense of uneven development and the rent gap as violent and ongoing, steeped in social, cultural, and ideological processes that belie hostile caricatures of a simple “economism.” Revolting New York contains none of the bold theoretical reformulations we might expect from either of its general editors, but it is not supposed to: it feels like a celebration of the fact that, in those moments of wild abandon, action remakes theory, just as it remakes the city.

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